

**A TESTIMONY OF THE OFFICE OF THE CHILD ADVOCATE
REGARDING AN ACT CONCERNING THE POSTING OF CARELINE
INFORMATION IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS.**

MARCH 2, 2016

Good morning, Representative Fleischmann, Senator Slossberg, Senator Boucher, Representative Lavielle, and distinguished members of the committee. I am Micheala Mitchell, testifying on behalf of the Child Advocate of the State of Connecticut, Sarah Eagan. The Child Advocate thanks you for the opportunity to offer testimony in support of **S.B 316, AN ACT CONCERNING THE POSTING OF CARELINE INFORMATION IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS.**

The primary statutory obligations of the Office of the Child Advocate (OCA) include evaluation and reporting regarding the efficacy of publicly-funded child-serving systems throughout the state. OCA meets regularly with lawmakers, policy-makers and other stakeholders to review and advocate for policies and practices that will promote children's well-being and safety. OCA also responds to daily calls for help regarding children with specialized needs.

Children of every gender, age, race, ethnicity, background, socioeconomic status and family structure are at risk for child abuse and neglect. Accordingly, protecting children from abuse and neglect is a community responsibility.

Children are most vulnerable to child sexual abuse between the ages of 7 and 13.¹ The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) estimates that approximately 1 in 6 boys and 1 in 4 girls are sexually abused before the age of 18.²

In 2013, over 7,000 children in Connecticut were *documented* victims of abuse or neglect. Of these children, 88.2% were neglected, 6.6% were physically abused, and 5.7% were sexually abused.³ ***Even these large numbers cannot account for the number of children who had no one to speak up for them or who were unable to speak up for themselves.***

The intent of mandatory reporting laws is to protect children. However, adults may fear reporting abuse or neglect regarding a family or they may not know that a child is being abused. The unfortunate truth is that too often children may not tell anyone when they have been abused due to guilt, shame, and confusion. Too many children believe they are mistreated because they did something to deserve it or because there is something wrong with them. Children may also be

¹ Statistics-Child Abuse. (2016). Retrieved from:

http://www.parentsformeganslaw.org/public/statistics_childSexualAbuse.html

² "Child Sexual Abuse: What Parents Should Know," American Psychological Association.) (February 19, 2014). Retrieved from: (<http://www.apa.org/pi/families/resources/child-sexual-abuse.aspx>)

³ Child Welfare League of America. (June 2015). Retrieved from: <http://www.cwla.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/2015-State-Fact-Sheet-Connecticut.pdf>

afraid to tell an adult or they may be unsure of how to safely communicate their fears. For these reasons, a majority of child sexual abuse cases go unreported.⁴

The bill will help ensure that youth know how to anonymously report their own concerns of abuse or neglect to the DCF Careline. Posting information containing the toll-free Child Abuse and Neglect Careline phone number in our public schools will also increase awareness of the programs and services that are available to young victims of abuse and neglect. The key to ensuring that the bill is effective, however, is to make certain that the information provided is accessible and understandable to all children.

OCA notes that other states including Texas, Missouri and Florida have enacted similar statutes mandating that schools post the telephone number of their CPS abuse “hotlines” in *conspicuous places frequented by students*. These states further require that signage include directions to access their respective CPS website, and even more important, that these postings be written in developmentally appropriate language. It is our responsibility to ensure that a child who has made the difficult decision to report an incident of abuse has all of the information necessary to follow through with that decision. To that end, OCA encourages the legislature to adopt similar provisions in order to fully inform vulnerable youth about the ways that they can access the help they need.

Sincerely,

Micheala Mitchell, J.D.

⁴ CPS reports may underestimate the true occurrence of abuse and neglect. A non-CPS study estimated that 1 in 4 children experience some form of child maltreatment in their lifetimes.